

Frozen Fish

By Reg P. Wydeven
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During my lifetime, I have had the good fortune of attending many sporting events. I've been to multiple Packers, Bucks, Brewers, Badgers, Blizzard and Timber Rattlers games. Next year I can't wait to go to Green Bay Phoenix games to watch family friend and Kimberly phenom Will Chevalier play basketball.

At practically all of these games, I've witnessed fans smuggling some sort of contraband into the stadium. I've seen people sneak in cowbells, air horns, whistles and laser pointers. I've seen food smuggled in places that I would no longer eat, knowing where it's been. I've seen tons of flasks of booze hidden in boots, especially at Packer and Badger football games.

But I've never seen anyone bring in a catfish.

That's the tradition, however, in Nashville. Fans of the Predators, Music City's local National Hockey League team, have been known to hurl catfish on the ice for luck. The custom is Nashville's variation of a rich hockey ritual that started in Detroit.

On April 15, 1952, brothers Pete and Jerry Cusimano hurled an octopus onto the ice in the Detroit Olympia Arena during a playoff game between the Detroit Red Wings and the Toronto Maple Leafs. The octopus' eight tentacles represented the number of wins the Wings needed to win the Stanley Cup, as the playoffs in those days only had two best-of-seven rounds. The Wings went on to win the Cup, sweeping the Leafs and the Montreal Canadiens. The tradition continues to this day.

On October 26, 2002, a Nashville fan threw a catfish on the ice during a home game against the Red Wings, and the tradition was born. It must be effective, for the Predators made it to the Stanley Cup Finals this year against the Pittsburgh Penguins. And while the practice is beloved in Nashville, Pittsburgh fans want nothing to do with it.

During Game One in Pittsburgh's PPG Paints Arena, 36-year-old Jacob Waddell, a visiting Predators fan, launched a 4-pound catfish onto the ice. Now known as Catfish Jake, the Nolensville, Tennessee, native was ejected from the game and then arrested for disorderly conduct, disrupting a meeting and possession of an instrument of crime.

After a win for the Penguins, cooler heads prevailed and the Allegheny County District Attorney's office dropped the case, deciding that "the actions of Mr. Waddell do not rise to the level of criminal charges."

While the authorities let it go, local businesses weren't so understanding. To ensure it wouldn't happen again, many Pittsburgh businesses are refusing to sell catfish to any customer with a Tennessee driver's license.

These businesses, like many across the country, are exercising their right to refuse service. But do businesses really have the right to refuse service? The answer is the same as when you ask a 99-year-old guy if he wears boxers or briefs – he says, "Depends."

The federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, along with numerous states' statutes, preclude businesses from discriminating against customers based on age, disability, sex, race, religion, and nationality. Opposing teams' fans, however, are afforded no such protections, so Pittsburgh businesses can discriminate against them.

Similarly, businesses can refuse service to customers that are rowdy or causing a scene, are threatening or are putting other customers in danger. They can also refuse to serve customers violating clothing or health policies, such as the standby "No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service."

Well, I guess I better keep my shirt on at the Resch Center for Will's games.

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